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extra

A marvellous recovery

Thomas Bewley

In 1955 I was a registrar at Claybury Hospital when a woman aged 52 was transferred from a general hospital, where she had been for several weeks following a stroke after which there were no signs of recovery. She could not speak, did not appear to be aware of her surroundings and needed spoon-feeding and total nursing care. She was therefore admitted directly to a long-stay psycho-geriatric ward, without having been seen by a consultant in the normal admission ward. When I examined her I found she was in better physical health than I might have expected and she was free of any signs of pressure sores. Two days after admission she moved her limbs slightly and said 'Thank you' to a nurse who was feeding her. On each of the following days there was a steady improvement in her condition. The nurses on this ward, who were not accustomed to seeing such improvements, were surprised by the changes. I encouraged them to help her to sit up, stand up, move to a chair, walk a little with help, walk further without help, until she gradually became able to look after herself. Her speech improved at the same time, an occasional slurred word was followed by clearer sentences and within 3 weeks she was talking normally. She had no idea of what had led to her being in hospital, but accepted the fact that she had been seriously ill. Her family, who visited her daily, were very impressed and delighted by her rapid return to her old self. Five weeks after admission she had few obvious sequelae and went home. Her family thanked me very warmly for my endeavours. They told me that the very best thing that had ever happened to their mother was her transfer from a hospital where nothing could be done to a mental hospital where modern psychiatric treatment brought about cure. I told them that I had done little but that the nurses had been very good in helping to rehabilitate her. 'No, no,' they said 'if it wasn't for you, Dr Bewley, none of this would have happened.' I think they saw me as the greatest doctor since Paracelsus. In my next 40 years as a psychiatrist I never came across a more grateful family.

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